

Shinkai Makoto: The “New Miyazaki” or a New Voice in Cinematic Anime?

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Shinkai Makoto has steadily consolidated a position as a distinctive and highly innovative animator in contemporary Japan. He has developed a reputation for highly idiosyncratic ‘auteur’ films where he is pivotal in almost every aspect of production—background layouts, character design and plot—and indeed he has been identified by some as the “new Miyazaki”.

This paper traces the rise of Shinkai as an animator, examining both the evolution of his distinctive animation techniques and his recurrent concern with fundamental questions of life and nostalgia. The aim is to quite emphatically distinguish Shinkai’s work from Miyazaki, and to discuss how in fact they have rather distinct animation styles and preoccupations.

Introduction

Shinkai Makoto 新海誠 has emerged as one of the premier auteur animators of the last ten to fifteen years, garnering awards for his largely solo produced works that display a distinctive set of thematics, narrative devices, and visual techniques. Shinkai was born with the original family name, Niitsu, in 1973 in Minamisaku-gun, Nagano Prefecture, into a family who owned a local construction company. He was apparently fond of science fiction from an early age but otherwise followed what might seem to be a relatively conventional path of progression through the education system with incidental involvement in Volleyball and Kyudo which culminated in his entering Chuo University to major in literature in 1991. During this time he dropped sport and joined the university’s children’s literature study club, eventually finding part-time work at an emerging game design company Nihon Falcom where he ultimately found full employment after graduating in 1996.¹

There is little in this outline of his earlier experience to suggest that he was to have such prodigious abilities in animation but this talent became increasingly apparent as he was given increasing responsibility for the advertising copy and artwork, and eventually even animated sequences both within the games and to promote the corporation’s games. Initial recognition as an independent animator came with an animated short *Distant World*, which won a special prize at eAT’98, but the major breakthrough came in 2000 with the release of a short film, *She and Her Cat*, which won the grand prix at the DoGA sponsored 12th CG Anime Contest. After this success he resigned from Falcom to embark on a string of productions that have become beacons of technical innovation and visual beauty, *Voices of a Distant Star* (2002), *The Place Promised in Our Early Days* (2004), *Five Centimeters Per Second* (2007) and *Children Who Chase Lost Voices From Deep Below* (2011). At this point

¹ Details of Shinkai Makoto’s biography and awards can be obtained at his personal site, “Other Voices,” <http://shinkaimakoto.jp/profile>.

Shinkai was well and truly established as an internationally recognized animator and he has since built on this reputation through a warmly nostalgic contemporary piece, *The Garden of Words* (2013), and a return to time-warping fiction with *Your Name* (2016). Perhaps as if to seal the fact that he has ‘arrived’ as one of the heavyweights of modern Japanese animation, the literary journal *Yuriika* has just released a Shinkai Makoto themed issue which deals solely with his oeuvre and style. And it is has been indicative of his success that from the time of *Five Centimeters Per Second* (2007) a variety of commentators have suggested that in Shinkai Makoto we have found a “new Miyazaki.”

A “New Miyazaki”?

As Adam Bingham notes slightly acerbically in the opening to his important commentary on Shinkai Makoto, “Distant Voices, Still Lives: Love, Loss, and Longing in the Work of Makoto Shinkai,” it is perhaps “as dispiriting as it is predictable” that an emergent notable talent in the realm of animated cinema would be styled as the “new Miyazaki” (Bingham 2009, 217). He notes, completely to the point in my view, that there are several marked thematic differences between the two. Firstly, environmentalism in the sense that Miyazaki treats it is largely absent from Shinkai’s work. In Miyazaki there is also the routine emphasis on the central place of family and communal belonging which could not really be further Shinkai’s preoccupations. And there is the motif of the “magical childhood” which, although not altogether absent from Shinkai (see, for example, *Children Who Chase Lost Voices*, 2011), the treatment is arguably more somber and alienated.

The other major point of departure is the treatment of nostalgia in Shinkai’s work. Bingham refers to Napier’s analytical category of the “elegiac” and certainly this is not an inappropriate association to make. In my own research (Swale 2015) I have argued for a more nuanced distinction between “nostalgia as mood” and “nostalgia as mode” based on the work of Paul Grainger, the former being close to the elegiac in some authentic sense, the latter being a stylistic technique that explores nostalgic sentiments for aesthetic effect. Certainly works such as *Five Centimeters Per Second* (and most of what has followed) fall within the compass of the former category. However, as we shall go on to note, the science fiction narrative devices that Shinkai is apt to employ in his earlier works tends to place the orientation firmly in the realm of “nostalgia as mode”. Even so, there are further orders of complexity to be explored with nostalgia—to Grainger’s distinction can be added commentary based on R.G. Collingwood’s concept of “magic” to accentuate how Miyazaki amplifies the latter sense in a distinctive way, one that accentuates nostalgia as a positive aesthetic trope capable of engaging with issues of identity and community. Certainly this contrasts deeply with the more pronounced ennui that has characterized Shinkai’s earlier works, although in his latest feature, *Your Name*, fresh questions of how Shinkai treats this positive order of nostalgia can be raised (and in the ensuing discussion it is suggested that these aspects of nostalgia are woven together in a complex tapestry within this work).

The foregoing tension between ‘nostalgia as mood’ and ‘nostalgia as mode’ in Shinkai’s works could be said to parallel what Bingham describes as the “pervasive structural antinomy between recognizable human drama [viz ‘mood’] and conceptual sci-fi narrative framework [viz ‘mode’]” (Bingham, 2009, 219). This point is reinforced in Yoko Ono’s discussion of the contradictory implications of how the main protagonists in *Voices of a Distant Star* (2002), for example, technically live chronologically at the same point in time but are torn between a lived present, where acquiescence

to fate is enjoined, accentuating ‘mood’, and a nostalgic past acutely mourned by the other character in a dystopian parallel space only made possible by space travel, suggesting a closer association with nostalgia as ‘mode’ (Ono 2002, 1–2, 6).

One further distinctive trait that Bingham very astutely identifies in Shinkai’s work is the preoccupation with time and its measurement (Bingham 2009, 220). In *Voices of a Distant Star* chronological time is the unspoken thread that ties disparate experiences together—it is what makes the tragic elements more acutely accentuated. And of course in *Five Centimeters Per Second* the pivot of the narrative is, after all, about the passing of a minutely quantifiable yet inexorable time, and our incapacity to do much about it. *Your Name* takes much from this earlier oeuvre and reworks it in even more complex and resonant ways. In the first half of the film, which centers predominantly on the comic potential of an adolescent boy and girl intermittently waking up in each other’s bodies, there is at the same an intriguing narrative device generated through the two characters recording their experiences through messages left on mobile phones. This creates the parallelism of a life lived which can only be accessed after the fact. In the second half of the film, time is stretched beyond any plausible mode of reckoning—the lived experiences are transposed into the realm of the impossible as Taki discovers that the person he has been shape-shifting with is in fact dead, and has been for several years. The motif of connection and continuity that somehow becomes possible despite physical and chronological separation finds its allegorical device in the traditional ‘musubi’ braid that both protagonists possess. This is not to suggest that the manipulation of time or the employment of allegorical motifs are absent from Miyazaki Hayao’s work, indeed *Spirited Away* (2001) demonstrates that he is capable of very similar flourishes. Yet considered as part of an overall tendency or a distinctive stylistic trait, we would have to conclude that Shinkai takes innovation in narrative based on the manipulation of time to quite extraordinary lengths.²

Defining the Aesthetic Vision

Much as these narrative devices pivoting on the treatment of time intrigue and perplex, perhaps the aspect of Shinkai’s oeuvre that requires deeper treatment is that of his visual technique and style. It has been commonplace to attribute certain aspects of this style to the “seikaikei” genre, —and much has been made of the term as denoting “. . . the genre preoccupied with ‘self-absorbed visions of the world’ that posits that the private love relationship of the main character and the heroine (‘you and me exclusively’) is directly connected to the vague yet ontological issue of ‘the end of the world’ without depicting the outside/external world, or in other words, the society or nation to which these characters belong” (Ono paraphrasing Azuma 2007 in Ono 2008, 2).³

Certainly Azuma has been pivotal in associating certain themes and narrative devices in anime with otaku culture in the 90s and beyond, but as both Ono and, to a lesser extent, Bingham both acknowledge there are antecedents that are apparent before *Neon Genesis Evangelion* such as *Mobile Suit Gundam* that substantially predate what we would identify as the nascent phase of otaku culture.

² For an exegesis of the treatment of time in Shinkai’s oeuvre prior to the release of *Your Name*, see Gavin Walker’s “The Filmic Time of Coloniality: On Shinkai Makoto’s *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*” (2009, 11–14).

³ It also receives a detailed and perhaps meandering treatment at length by Shu Kuge in “In the World that is Infinitely Inclusive: Four Theses on *Voices of a Distant Star* and *Wings of Honneamie*” (Kuge 2007, 251–66).

Bingham highlights a “poetic narrative structure and *visual lexicon* [my italics]” but then proceeds to explain them as part of a deeper aesthetic tradition of “mono no aware,” followed by a digression into the significance of seasons in *The Japanese Mind*, followed yet again by a brief exposition of how a pastiche of “postmodern” reading based on Barthes and Baudrillard somehow helps us understand what makes Shinkai’s aesthetic vision more readily comprehensible (Bingham 2009, 221–223). While this commentary has merit as a contextualising exegesis it is his discussion of the “visual lexicon” that is more persuasive. He highlights, for example, the techniques of manipulating light in Shinkai’s work, which is certainly closer to achieving an analysis of the visual aesthetic. This is couched in a series of references to Ozu Yasujiro which is certainly a useful point of comparison; the use of built structures (everything from canals, to roads, to temples and even long corridors) combined with the adroit placement of shafts of light to punctuate the space, along with occasional broad panorama perspectives enhance the sense of a more cosmic perspective. These are indeed all relevant to developing a broader appreciation of what makes Shinkai’s visual lexicon work. Even so, Bingham’s references to “takes” and “camera” also suggests a line of interpretation that neglects the fact that there are no ‘takes’ or ‘cameras’ in animation design. So his comments are completely *a propo* in the sense that the manipulation of light and space is precisely one of the key elements in Shinkai’s “visual lexicon,” but otherwise the exegesis seems to drift toward the miasma of psychoanalysis or unreconstructed film theory, and we need a more appropriate aesthetic frame of analysis if we are indeed to deal with this visual lexicon more directly.

Ono, for that matter, also relies on Azuma to provide an exegesis of the distinctive anatomy of Shinkai’s art, —ultimately this means that when she is following his earlier perspective as embodied in *The Animalising Postmodern* (2001) we are presented with a surmising of what motivates young people to embrace anime based on assumptions about their collective psychology via Lyotard, or we have a more contextualised discussion of how that psychology emerges from an emergent media environment based on his latter title *The Birth of Gamic Realism* (2007). This forces her to treat the protagonists in *Voices of a Distant Star* as participating in two versions of game experience, —I would suggest Noriko “. . . fights against Tarsians as in a shooting game. In that sense both protagonists represent game players, though in different types of games” (Ono 2007, 6). It also requires us to believe that when ‘otaku’ watch this animation they project a sense of their own gaming experience into their interpretation of what is going on. It would seem to be intuitively accurate to suggest that when they watch it, they watch it as cinematic anime, and not as an interactive text (let alone a game), —there is arguably a need to be more rigorous about how we apply the premises of media experiences across different media platforms.⁴

My intention here is not to suggest that such commentaries have no merit, especially when they do serve to provide a perfectly valid exploration of issues of psychological motivation or cultural expression on a communal level, —but I would like to make it clear that these approaches have limitations with regard to analysing animation as an *aesthetic* phenomenon. And we miss out on some

⁴ There are indeed scholars who have teased the implications of interactive media experiences on the evolution of narrative, spectacle and character, but from a Cognitivist perspective it would be difficult to suggest that watching a film is psychologically akin to playing a game. See for example, Kirsten “Cinema 3.0: The Interactive-Image,” *Cinema Journal* 50.1 (2010): 81–98.

of the truly remarkable aspects of Shinkai's contribution to the evolution of Japanese animation if we do not define the brief more carefully.

Toward a Definitive "Fūkei" Style

An instance of how we might approach recent developments in Japanese animation, including Shinkai Makoto's, is provided by Sheou Hui Gan in "The Newly Developed Form of Ganime and its Relation to Selective Animation for Adults in Japan" (Gan 2008). Gan makes no bones about dispensing with the term "limited animation" and substituting the phrase "selective animation" which certainly expels some of the potentially negative connotations of 'limited' and re-orientates the attention toward the fact that certain modes of artistic expression may be deliberately adopted despite a supposed 'lack' of resonance with the visual expectations of camera-generated visual images. Hence he alights on an initiative that came out a collaboration between Tōei Animation and Gentōsha in 2006 which promoted the concept of "Ganime," a term which is produced from an amalgam of the character for picture (*ga* 画) and 'anime' (Gan 2008, 6–16).

The rationale of Ganime was to endorse a form of "slow animation"—an artistic brief to release animators from the imperatives of the commercial model and digital design to embrace a broader and in a certain sense counter-modern mode of expression. Accordingly, productions that entailed integrating 2D graphic art and even marionettes were welcomed as representative of avenues that would fulfil the vision. The examples highlighted in Gan's article reflect this—*Fantascopie - tylostoma* (2006) and *Tori no uta* (2005) by Amano Yoshitaka, a collaborator with Oshii Mamoru on *Angel's Egg* (1985), along with *The Dunwich Horror and Other Stories* (2007) by Shinagawa Ryō, the editor of *Studio Voice* magazine and a collaborator with Yamashita Shōhei. Yoshioka's works exemplify the credo of integrating graphic art with minimal movement into the flow of composition while Shinagawa's piece uses hand-molded figurines and miniature sets with again minimalistic movement and an inherent stillness. Movement is also generated through the manipulation of perspective (including with actual camera movement) combined with the adroit superimposing of layers to create a depth of field.⁵

Interestingly, Shinkai is not included in the selection of case-studies and perhaps for a number of pertinent reasons. But Gan does refer to Okada Toshio's perspective on Shinkai's contribution in providing some of the groundwork for the Ganime initiative. Okada, as a former President at Gainax and also a noted scholar of otaku culture, has been well-placed to observe the artistically constraining impact of the modern animation production system with its focus on building franchises (such as *Mobile Suit Gundam* with Tomino Yoshiyuki) or the more generalised constraint of having to adapt material to cater to particular demographics and fan-bases. He notes, however, that the arrival of Shinkai's *Voices of a Distant Star* "broke the mold" so to speak by demonstrating, first and foremost, that it was possible for an individual to produce high quality animation to almost feature length and that it could be critically well-received and successful. Shinkai made this possible by taking anime's "typical visual norms" and combining them an "atypical narrative setting" with an emphasis placed

⁵ The intrinsic propensity for "limited animation" to derive motion from the motion of layers in relation to each other on multiple planes is thoroughly covered in Thomas Lamarre's "From Animation to Anime: Drawing Movements and Moving Drawings" (2002, 329–67).

on “the inner emotions of the protagonist” (Gan 2008, 14). As such this reiterates the essence of what both Bingham and Ono have highlighted with regard to Shinkai’s combining lived worlds with dystopic parallel worlds.

More significant, however, is the manner in which Shinkai technically constructs his worlds visually. Okada notes the “careful observations and photographic-like details depicting the sights and sounds of everyday life; for example, the signal of a railroad crossing, a signboard in front of a convenience store, advertisements found in the bus station and train, hand phones and the sound of cicadas.”⁶ However, Gan concludes, appropriately one might suggest, that Shinkai’s work does not go as far as the Ganime productions he discusses earlier in greater detail—and certainly there is a case to be made that he is indeed a *sekai-kei* セカイ系 animator working in a more mainstream style of visualization, albeit with important stylistic and technical differences which set his work apart.

The analysis of such distinctive visual traits in Shinkai’s work is precisely what enables us to get to the heart of what makes his contribution to contemporary animation aesthetically ground-breaking. We can accept several aspects of Bingham and Okada’s observations that deal with that dimension of his work and perhaps we can even expand on them. As Okada notes, there is the minute detail in the drafting of environments, both interior and exterior, which distinguishes Shinkai’s style. As Bingham observes, there is also the skillful deployment of light sources to either highlight elements in the frame or, in some cases, provide shafts of colour that bind several layers within the *mise en scène* together. Another dimension that could be added is the attention that Shinkai gives to the composition of basic components in the frame as extreme foreground, middle ground and backdrop. The backdrop is typically an expansive area, often the sky, and in the middle ground there are blocks of either buildings or other structures that connect the backdrop with the foreground where more often than not the more intense engagement with the protagonists in the frame are placed. The middle ground usually entails an angle that enhances the sense of perspective, sweeping the eye toward the backdrop. Sometimes structures such as lamp posts or even power pylons can be used to literally integrate the middle ground with the sky. Other times it is enough to simply have a railway line, a road or pathway by a river to link the different components. Interiors present a different order of difficulty but this is surmounted by skillfully employing windows or doorways to evoke a space beyond—often accentuating that space by having light pour through into the interior. In the case of *The Garden of Words* (2013) the pergola is used to frame the interaction between the main characters with the angular perspective drawing the viewer to become aware of an expanse of garden beyond.

In and of themselves, these compositional traits are certainly not necessarily unique to Shinkai—indeed it is not difficult to find parallels with the compositional styles of film-makers such as Ozu Yasujiro (as Bingham elucidates) or even a key exponent of the ‘monumental style’ such as Mizoguchi Kenji. There are even notable antecedents that can be identified in terms of the design traditions of ukiyo-e, the *fūkei-ga* (landscape) works of Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige which provide instructive cases in point in terms of the skillful treatment of foreground, middle ground and backdrop. None of these references are employed here to suggest that Shinkai is consciously attempting to rework these traditions in his animation—it is rather the organic working out of an

⁶ Gan (2008, 14–15), referring to Okada’s 2006 article “Nyū media kuriēshon: Ji-sedai kuriētā no tame no shinmedia ganime.”

aesthetic sensibility that now finds its expression through digital media. It is also noteworthy that the dominant theme for discussing Shinkai Makoto's work in the recently released issue of *Yuriika* is not so much the oft-quoted "sekai-kei" genre or nostalgia infused with alienation, but what I would agree is at the heart of his distinctive style—*fūkei* 風景.⁷ What makes Shinkai's work revolutionary is the manner in which he has used software such as Lightwave and Photoshop to invigorate a process of integrating compositional elements in surprisingly vivid and affective ways.

A working demonstration of Shinkai's highly evocative talent for reworking *fūkei* is provided by one of the special features included with the 2003 NHK's *Minna no uta*—containing "Egao" 笑顔 which provides highly detailed glimpses into Shinkai's production techniques as they particularly relate to the creation of backdrops from photographic templates and the integration of three dimensional assets within the compass of the ensemble environment. It would be tempting to conclude that Shinkai is in some sense merely importing photographic templates into his work, but close attention reveals the manner in which he can completely transform the mood and ambience of a backdrop image by either turning a daytime scene into twilight, or adding light sources at unusual angles to accentuate form and texture. Shinkai is in fact particularly distinct in this regard when compared with Miyazaki, —Shinkai seems to be equally at home in the contemporary urban environment as he is in a completely natural one. In *Your Name*, to refer to the most recent example, there is no strong sense that Shinkai idealises the rural world and its milieu while reviling the megalopolis—on the contrary the vast panoramas of the Tokyo morning skyline suggest something of a euphoria about the cityscape. Shinkai seems to celebrate the city we actually inhabit and not one that we would need to attempt to locate in a nebulous Mediterranean or central European setting in the past.

This celebratory nuance to Shinkai's more recent work provides another reason why we might want to reassess the *sekai-kei* association, —there is a discernible change in the treatment of nostalgia and alienation in his more recent films. If we take *Five Centimeters Per Second* as the high tide mark for what was initially considered the staple of Shinkai's somewhat pessimistic and elegiac nostalgia we find that by contrast the orientation of *The Garden of Words* and *Your Name* is arguably toward romantic attachment as possessing a more positive valence, even when things do not go as one would wish. If *Five Centimeters Per Second* might be described as an acute diagnosis of the kind of isolation and alienation that can occur despite love, *The Garden of Words* and *Your Name* suggest at the very least that such love provides a potential antidote.

Conclusion

Quite apart from the fairly obvious speciousness of suggesting that one auteur is somehow a new incarnation of a predecessor, we can still find some interesting points of contrast between Shinkai and Miyazaki. In Shinkai the treatment of the environment is rather different, and it is not that he is indifferent to such issues, but rather that he displays his concern in a different way. Shinkai displays

⁷ Regarding this point, the following contributions are noteworthy: Ishioka Yoshiharu, "Shinkai Makoto no kessetsuten/tenkaiten to shite no *Kimi no na ha*" (Ishikawa 2016) and Kōno Satoko, "Shinkai Makoto no 'fūkei' no tenkai" (Kōno 2016), both in *Yuriika*, September 2016 (Seidosha).

a strong concern for the world we currently inhabit, both visually and thematically, even when he engages in science fiction. He also, as pointed out above, Displays an equal fascination for the lived environment of the city as well as the countryside. As the recent special issue of *Yuriika* devoted to Shinkai Makoto highlights, it is this concern with landscape (風景) in the broadest sense that lies at the heart of his distinctive style and aesthetic—what Bingham so aptly refers to as his “visual lexicon.”

At the same time, there is Shinkai’s treatment of nostalgia which is also a marked point of difference, or at least it displays a rather different trajectory of development. In Shinkai’s earlier works the dominant tone is definitely closer to Grainge’s concept of nostalgia as “mood”—it is predominantly ‘elegiac.’ This, admittedly, alters and takes new forms in his latest work, particularly *Your Name*, which does suggest a move toward a conception of nostalgia that resonates more with Miyazaki’s use of nostalgic tropes to evince “magic”—an aesthetic that reconnects and re-enriches the present. At a deeper level perhaps the aspect that most fundamentally distinguishes Shinkai’s outlook from Miyazaki’s—is that Shinkai is a product of the generation and milieu that Miyazaki in some ways has been trying to ‘mend’, through a combination of stirring allegorical story-telling and an appeal to community (Sakai, 2008, 31–40). Shinkai cannot help but articulate the world he has lived, —and unsurprisingly he tells his story as part of that generation, “from the inside out.” It is also significant that while he employs sci-fi premises for a number of his narratives, there is always a constant attachment to depicting, in loving detail, the lived world, through phones, scooters, railway crossings, school uniforms, kitchen appliances and even pets. That he has chosen to let this narrative style evolve toward something more nuanced and in a sense offering hope is arguably a sign of his maturity as now a much older practitioner.

Overall, then, we find in Shinkai the emergence of a new voice, one that adopts neither Miyazaki’s concept of nostalgia nor his view of the world—much less the allegorical narratives and design traits apparent in Miyazaki’s character design. Shinkai represents a new generation that has struggled to disentangle itself from a social legacy not of its own making—that he has achieved this without an extreme or vehement rejection of earlier anime traditions but in fact through the almost gentle suffusion of a much deeper aesthetic sensibility combined with cutting edge digital effects attests to an outstanding creative talent indeed.

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